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## *George F. Will* **Is Bush Tough Enough?**

HOUSTON—Many residents of this city speak with an accent strong enough to make even other Texans blanch. But George Bush does not. The son of a senator from Connecticut (Prescott Bush), he was polished at Andover and Yale. Today he lives in the temperate affluence of a Houston suburb, and he intends to live in Washington in 1981.

Thus far his strenuous presidential campaign has been a long march through Republican rallies, evoking showers of bouquets and cheers. But viewed in a dry, impartial light, his progress suggests a cautionary thought. One reason he looms large in the thoughts of many Republican activists, and many journalists, is that he is an oasis of novelty in a desert of sameness. (For those to whom politics is primarily entertainment, nothing offends like reruns.)

Everyone who knows Bush likes him, and that, strange to say, is a problem. He seems devoid of that trace of meanness that people find somehow reassuring as an alloy of vaulting ambition. The recurring question among his admirers is, "Is he tough enough?"

Part of the problem is his appearance and demeanor. Plainly put, he is too skinny and preppy. Some people find that he seems, at first blush, just right for a Yale first baseman, but somehow not bulky enough for a president. FDR, although gently bred, was ungentle, and reassuringly cynical. Bush's angularity, languid gracefulness and ingenuousness can add up to an impression of boyishness.

Furthermore, he has won only two elections, both to Congress, and he lost two Senate races. In 1964, he was caught in the Goldwater undertow. In 1970, he found himself flanked on the right when Lloyd Bentsen upset the liberal incumbent, Ralph Yarborough, in the Democratic primary.

Bush is aware of the "toughness" issue, and he becomes flinty when reciting the following facts:

He left Yale at 18 in 1941 to enlist in the Navy. He was, briefly, the Navy's youngest pilot. In the Pacific theater he was shot down and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, and three air medals. After Yale he could have gone to Wall Street, to Brown Brothers Harriman or some similarly genteel cathedral of enterprise. Instead, he headed for the West Texas oil fields to sell drilling equipment. He founded an oil company that prospered in rough-and-tumble competition.

As chairman of the GOP during Watergate, he managed to put distance between the party and the White House. As director of the CIA he administered difficult changes. He also has been head of the U.S. mission in Peking.

Perhaps Bush is, as George Romney was, the sort of candidate who prospers only from the year after the last election through the year before the next, that period in which boredom leads people to invest new figures with an untested aura of potency. But Bush's principal problem is Ronald Reagan. And it is possible that Ronald Reagan's support today is, as Edmund Muskie's support was in 1971, like a piece of Steuben crystal, impressive but fragile, and vulnerable to one knock.

Many Republicans who feel deep affection and respect for Reagan also feel a vague sense of regret, or at least dampened spirits, when they conclude that they are duty-bound to support him again. They are not exactly looking for an excuse to feel absolved from that duty. But they could easily come to feel absolved by something—perhaps the New Hampshire primary—that they could construe as an absolving event.

LBJ in 1968 and Muskie in 1972 suffered crippling New Hampshire "victories" that fell short of expectations raised by journalists. If Reagan finishes second in New Hampshire, or even if he wins by an "unimpressive" plurality in a crowded field, many supporters may seek new heroes.

Just as Reagan is more moderate and subtle than he has sometimes appeared, Bush is more conservative and formidable than he has yet made clear. He does not squint at the world with raisin-like eyes, seeing high office as the only earthly good. But he has used the last year well. Only a foolish person would, today, bet on any particular candidate against the entire field of candidates. But if you are compelled at gunpoint to do so, it would not be utterly unreasonable to bet on Bush.